


# Using New Technologies to Strengthen Democracy

*Chris Spence is Chief Technology Officer at the [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)](#). He leads information technology initiatives to promote and strengthen democracy around the world. Spence has conducted NDI technology programs assisting partner organizations in the advancement of democracy in dozens of countries, including 10 in Africa.*

He offers this preview on issues he can discuss with YALI Network members in a [February 10-12 #YALICHAT](#).

I'm delighted to have the opportunity to participate in an engagement with the YALI Network. You've created an important and exciting community, and I can't wait to hear from all of you and share my experiences!

I lived and worked in southern Africa with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) from 1996 through 2001, so I have a personal interest in good governance on the continent. While there, I worked in at least a dozen countries on technology and democracy programs. I helped Africans  adapt to new technologies across various sectors: parliaments in Namibia, South Africa, Nigeria, Malawi and Sierra Leone; civil society and election monitoring groups in the same countries as well as Angola and Mozambique. I helped IT experts in Tanzania and South African governments come up to speed on technological advances of value to them

The rapid adoption of technology provides one of the most exciting opportunities for African democracy we've ever seen. Africans are more connected, and enjoy greater information access than ever before. At the same time, mobile and Internet access expand every day. These trends will have a powerful influence on the future, and will play a central role in the careers of young leaders like you who will chart the course for democracy, economic development and good governance across the continent.

As you all know, some of the best technological innovation has come from the Africa, including products that can help advance democracy. In fact, a small Nigerian tech firm called [Timba Objects](#) developed what has become NDI's most widely used election monitoring tool. Called NDItech Elections, it gives civic groups capability to demand accountability in elections from their governments. Recently, NDI's [DemTools initiative](#) released the Timba Objects code as an open source project. We reuse this tool in many of our election monitoring programs around the world.

NDI is proud to work with Timba Objects and its founder Tim Akinbo in broadening the availability of these innovative tools.

I look forward to taking your questions on the Facebook chat. I hope a few of you might also ask me about the challenges that come along with the use of these new technologies.

Both the political establishment and their publics must adapt. Parliaments, political parties, and governments need to evolve quickly to keep pace with the citizens they represent and serve. Joining their citizens on the latest technological platforms is critical if governments are to maintain public confidence.

Citizens also incur a new level of personal risk as they embrace new communication technologies and use them as tools in political activities. For example, individual privacy is challenged, as institutions or companies access our information and communications with neither our knowledge or consent. We have to be aware that's going on, and be cautious about how much access to our information we allow.

My team at NDI has been very focused on these challenges in recent years and I'd be happy to address any questions or concerns you have along these lines.

I look forward to your questions and comments during this [#YALICHAT](#). I'm certainly eager to learn from all of you!


Learn more about Chris Spence and the IT component of NDI's work on their [blog](#).

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## Teaching Children 'to Walk in Light'

*As the founder of a consulting firm devoted to training young adults in business competence, Oluwasemiye Michael Larayetan readies a new generation for leadership. AYEM, African Youths Empowerment Movement, has been providing business training in Abuja, Nigeria, since 2000. For the last eight years, though, Semiye Michael has gone farther ... literally. A YALI Network member, he formed the [OneKidProject](#), working to educate rural children who live far away from city life.*

With the help of my wife, volunteers and donors, I'm working to give an abandoned generation a personal voice of emancipation and self-identity.

Oluwasemiye Michael Larayetan,  surrounded by some of the children he helps through the OneKidProject.

I started the OneKidProject to meet challenges impeding education in the rural villages in Abuja Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. We want to identify the most vulnerable children and find funding sources to educate them. We provide rural children with tuition fees, school uniforms, learning materials and spiritual support.

Parental counseling is another critical part of our work. Getting parents to believe that education is an essential tool for human development is an ongoing challenge. Rural Nigerians have inherited a culture where formal education is not valued. They have little or no explanation about why they should value learning, and some don't believe they need to improve their way of life for themselves and their children.


I want to help educate these rural children because we cannot leave people in darkness and expect

them to walk in light. The future of these rural communities depends on expanding their capabilities and opportunities. These kids will become adults, taking calculated decisions about growth in their communities. Preparing these youngsters for that challenge with education will change their history and culture.

The “One Kid Project” was a funding plan and not a name in the beginning. Friends and family started giving financial backing when I told them they could provide help for “just one kid.” Annual support of one child is about 5,000 Nigerian naira [\$26.30 US]. Then we found the slogan was an effective way to convince people that even small donations are valued. Soon enough, we got many people helping just one kid.

Another reason I began this: It bothered my heart that government and other civil society organizations provide minimal support to rural areas for social or infrastructure development. These organizations and agencies complain greatly about the terrain one must cross to reach these villages and may use that as an excuse to say greater support can't be delivered.

But my volunteers and I travel to these places for the OneKidProject. Some of the closest villages are reached in three hours' driving. A new volunteer is offering an all-terrain vehicle for transport, but we use motorcycles mostly and paddle canoes to reach villages that are surrounded by rivers. Some are inaccessible during rainy seasons.

OneKidProject delivers sandals to rural  children. The simple act of wearing shoes can prevent disease-causing parasites from entering their bodies.

Even while coping with the risky and challenging adventure, we have been able to team up with the few teachers in these villages to improve their methods, and allow accommodation of new children without creating an excess workload for the available teachers.

Health problems are another challenge for these children. In one village, some of our students became sick from bilharzia [schistosomiasis]. This is a parasitic disease, spread by snails in contaminated water, and it makes the children ill with diarrhea and vomiting. Some can even die.

OneKidProject launched an advocacy campaign about this health threat. That brought a national television station to the village for a video story they broadcast. The news coverage caught the attention of other organizations, and we're hoping that we may get help to build a borehole [well] for the village.


We have 120 kids from five villages receiving school fees from the OneKidProject. Our rural kids are learning English little by little. Seeing the improvement in these children, other parents now want to enroll their own kids for schooling.

The OneKidProject goal is to provide 50 kids full sponsorship yearly, with a few others receiving more limited support, in the form of books, school bags or sandals.

If democracy will do human beings any good, education remains the vehicle to that destination. That's what I am doing with these children.

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# Candidate Debates Are Centerpiece of Democracy: 1 of 3

Republican presidential nominee Mitt   
Romney answers a question posed by  
moderator Bob Schieffer as President Obama  
listens during the third presidential debate in  
2012.

Debates among competing electoral candidates have become a campaign centerpiece in elections worldwide. More than 60 countries have developed a debate tradition, and civil society groups have been critical in making that happen.

Debates help voters make informed choices and encourage candidates to focus on policy issues, a conviction so widely held that these candidate showdowns have become mainstays of the electoral process in many places.

The National Democratic Institute, a nonprofit, nongovernmental, Washington-based think tank, offers the following guidelines about debates.

## **What Is a Candidate Debate?**

A candidate debate is a neutral, dignified forum where political party leaders or others competing for elected office respond to the same questions, as posed by voters, a moderator or other debaters. Listeners are able to compare the candidates' positions on issues.

Candidates mutually agree on rules, mostly regarding response and speaking time, to ensure fairness. Debates normally include some interaction among candidates through rebuttals or follow-on questions.

## **Goal of Debates**

Debates address issues — not persons, religion or ethnicity. They will promote political tolerance, constructive dialogue and service to the people.

## **Debates Help Candidates Prepare to Campaign, Govern if Elected**

Debates help candidates focus on issues they may not previously have focused on.

"They force us to think ahead." — Bob Dole, 1996 U.S. presidential candidate for the Republican

Party

“I am convinced that the debates I went through ... actually helped me to be a better president.” — Bill Clinton, U.S. president 1993-2001

### **Debates Inform Voters**

Debates are often the only time during a campaign when candidates are together at the same time in the same place. This gives voters an opportunity to make side-by-side comparisons and gives candidates a chance to say why they are best suited for the elected office.

### **Debates Help Reduce Political Tensions**

In divided election environments or countries emerging from conflict, debates give political rivals a chance to show that, despite their differences, they can treat each other with mutual respect while they disagree on the issues.

Debates also provide a chance for candidates to commit publicly to a peaceful election, including agreeing to accept election results and use nonviolent legal channels to resolve election disputes.

### **Debates Promote Accountability of Elected Officials**

During a debate, a candidate's statements, policy positions and campaign promises become part of the public record. Once winning candidates take office, civic groups and the media can hold them accountable by citing transcripts or press coverage of debates.

### **Debates Highlight the Health of a Democracy**

Debates are increasingly seen as benchmarks of a healthy democracy. Citizens view debates as an indication of an open, transparent election process where all candidates can compete equally.

More on debates is available in “[Organizing and Producing Candidate Debates](#)” on the National Democratic Institute website.

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## **Nigerian YALI Member Stands Up to Violence**

*“I want the light in the life of every YALI Network member to shine so bright that others might, through their light, find their way.”*


— Peacemaker Prosper Egeonu

By the time he was 30, Prosper Egeonu had witnessed too much violence in central Nigeria's Plateau

state. He didn't want to see any more.

Thousands have died in conflict that has erupted in outbreaks of violence for more than a decade. Indigenous peoples and settlers from other ethnic groups clash over access to land, power and resources.


His youth scarred by the horrific acts of intercommunity violence, Egeonu began to devote his business, civic and personal activities to ending violence.

Prosper Egeonu and other young leaders   
participate in a daylong National Youth  
Leadership Summit in October 2014.

In 2009 Egeonu, a YALI Network member, joined the Jos Crisis Appeal Fund (JCAF) as a volunteer, determined to get more people in the Plateau state capital city to stand up to the horrific acts.

JCAF is a partnership between Christians, Muslims and civil society groups that raises funds to provide financial assistance, medical attention and education to local families affected by conflict. This grass-roots civic group also helps displaced families find stable homes, Egeonu says, and funds organizations that work for peace.

In 2010, Egeonu started [Swagg News Africa](#), a media entertainment group, and Stanperz Conceptz, a roofing business. He combined the outreach efforts of both these enterprises to start the "Stop the Violence" campaign. The campaign aims to promote awareness of peace and to provide a talent showcase for youth from all religions. He partnered with a local radio station to provide youth with the entertainment program Friday Night Dance Party with Joey.

From right Egeonu, the Reverend Father   
Blaize Agwom, Chris (no last name  
given) and Jerry (no last name given). All  
work at DREP in Jos.


Entertainment is "the latest revolution that captures the visions of the social-economic potential of Nigerian youth," Egeonu believes, and awareness of that potential is a way to turn young people away from violence.

He went on to partner with the Performing Musicians Employers' Association of Nigeria to further get the message of peace to music fans. He even recruited young U.S. hip-hop artist Akon and actor J.D. Williams to craft messages to "stop the violence."

Continuing his pursuit of peace, in 2013 Egeonu joined the national nonprofit [Dialogue, Reconciliation and Peace](#) (DREP) as a volunteer trainer. DREP brings together youth, women, and local leaders of various religious and ethnic groups to learn from each other about how they can "resolve issues that would otherwise result in violent confrontation" and create peace.

While Egeonu admits that his efforts to reach his goal can sometimes be frustrating — volunteers become disinterested, illiteracy among some in the target groups limits his ability to get messages

through, and financial constraints limit DREP's peacebuilding efforts from reaching more rural communities – he remains determined. "Responses I get from people I reach have been positive," he said. He suggests more training in leadership and teambuilding for fellow volunteers in order to help them stay interested.

In front, from left, are a Hausa  community leader, the chief imam of Jos Central Mosque, Egeonu and Berom (no last name given). In back is the Afizere community leader. The photo was taken after a dialogue and reconciliation consultative meeting at DREP.


Egeonu is active in the YALI Network and especially likes the #YALICHAT discussion forum. He has earned YALI Network certificates for [online courses](#) in civic leadership, business and entrepreneurship, and public management.

"I have learned a lot from YALI resource information," he says. "It has built me to be a better leader." He says the highest call of leadership is "unlocking the potential of other people." And he urges other youth to join YALI and to engage their communities to help solve problems.

"I want the light in the life of every YALI Network member to shine so bright that others might, through their light, find their way," he says.

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## **An Equal Stake in the Democratic Process**


A smiling poll worker greeted Zambian  voters in January.

Thirteen sub-Saharan African nations hold elections in 2015; Comoros, Lesotho and Nigeria all choose new officials in February alone. These votes will be cast at a time when some international observers express concern that the progress of democracy is slipping in sub-Saharan Africa, that gains over the last 20 years are slowing or reversing.

[YALI.state.gov](#) will devote content to the twin topics of democracy and good governance in February, bringing the YALI Network insights into the current international benchmarks for what democracies do and how they should operate.

Members of the YALI Network also will be sharing their stories with the community, demonstrating

how they are acting in their communities to improve democracy, voter participation, good governance and equal opportunity.

A Zambian voter casts a ballot in the  January 2015 elections.

*“Government of the people, by the people, for the people.”*

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th U.S. president, made this description of democracy famous at a crucial time in the nation’s history. This definition is still widely quoted today, more than 150 years later.

Though democracy has a long history in the West, recent decades put democracy on the fast track. Fewer than half of the world’s nations were democracies in 1991. By 2006, 64 percent were democracies, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development. Just a decade and a half ago, democracy was considered largely a Western model. Fifteen years later, it is the predominant form of government globally, and internationally perceived as the source from which a government must draw its legitimacy.

### **Advancing Democracy**

*The U.S. government supports the growth of freedom, democracy and human dignity in other nations through these objectives:*

- 1) Promote participatory, representative political processes.*
- 2) Foster greater institutional, legal accountability.*
- 3) Protect human rights.*

[Read more about the DRG strategy](#)

The United Nations has set standards for what a democracy is meant to deliver — freedoms of expression, assembly, association, vote and participation in public affairs.

Defining democracy is one thing, but making it work — day-to-day, for one and all — is a moving target.

In fact, distinguished Yale University political scientist Robert A. Dahl has suggested five criteria that a nation should achieve if a government wants to be known as a democracy:

- 1. Effective participation:** Citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities to form their preference, place questions on the public agenda and express reasons for one outcome over the other.
- 2. Voting equality at the decisive stage:** Each citizen must be assured his or her judgments will be counted as equal in weight to the judgments of others.
- 3. Enlightened understanding:** Citizens must enjoy ample and equal opportunities for discovering



and affirming what choice would best serve their interests.

4. **Control of the agenda:** People must have the opportunity to decide what political matters actually are of importance to them, and what should be brought up for deliberation.
5. **Inclusiveness:** Equality must extend to all citizens within the state. Everyone has a legitimate stake within the political process.

In a 2014 obituary, the New York Times described Robert A. Dahl as “his profession’s most distinguished student of democratic government.” His most notable works are the books *Who Governs*, *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, and *Democracy and Its Critics*.


How strong are democracies in your region? The nongovernmental organization Freedom House conducts an annual survey, [Freedom in the World](#).

Further resources on the topic are [here](#).

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## Nigerian Catfish Farmer Believes in “African Dream”

More and more young Africans are discovering that they can make farming a profitable career.

Enayon Anthony pours feed into his  catfish pond.

Enayon Anthony is from a rural part of Delta state in Nigeria. Anthony loved the catfish his mother raised and cooked for family meals throughout his youth. He even enjoyed feeding the fish. Eventually, he determined that fish could provide him with a livelihood.

“You can be a farmer and still make a good and honest living from it,” says the successful fish farmer and YALI Network member.

Anthony, 28, raises his stock with care. He buys fingerlings from a friend at a good price, feeds them nutritious commercial feed and regularly checks the quality of the water in his pond, which is connected to a river. If he determines that the pond’s water quality has declined or that the fish are not eating, he drains the pond and refills it with fresh water, which he treats to control bacteria.


“I have to check my fish every day,” he says.

It takes six months for fingerlings to grow to the size where they can be harvested and sold. “We sell the fish we harvest right on the farm,” Anthony says, adding that sales are good. His primary customers are local women fishmongers, who sell the catfish in local markets.

“It is profitable selling catfish compared to other farm products,” he says, adding that farm-grown fish are less expensive than river fish. His goal is to expand his catfish farm to become one of the largest in West Africa.

“A lot of youth are coming into catfish farming,” he says. “The future of catfish is very bright.”

He wants other YALI Network members to understand that agriculture “is one sector that can move Africa to the next level” by providing both income and employment opportunities.

Anthony prepares to harvest  mature fish.

On a larger scale, Anthony says, “the agriculture sector is big. ... Let’s feed Africa and beyond.”

Anthony praises the YALI Network for “really opening my eyes and mind to dreaming” and “meeting people of like minds who have the same dream about Africa.”

“I call it the #AfricanDream,” he says.

“I am personally committed to an Africa that works fairly for Africans of all ethnic and religious backgrounds,” he continues.

“Thanks for YALI.”

Other young Africans have been sharing their experiences in agricultural expansion. Read more:

[Namibian Family Farm Group Strives to Expand](#)

[Benin Gardeners Tap Land and Water to Create a Small Business](#)


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## **Advances in Crop Technology Benefit Africa’s Smallholder Farmers**

Smallholder farmers in Africa are starting to reap the rewards of steady advances in crop technology.

One of the most promising advances for farmers is agricultural biotechnology. With nearly 3 million hectares planted in maize, soybeans and cotton from seeds derived from biotechnology, South Africa ranks as the leading sub-Saharan country to grow biotech crops, according to a new report from the nonprofit International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications, the world’s leading network of agricultural research centers. South Africa grows three biotech crops: maize, soybean and cotton.

In 2014, 18 million farmers, 90 percent of them smallholders, planted biotech crops in 28 countries around the world, says the report from the group, also known as ISAAA.

Karembu continues her research,  examining a young plant in an ISAAA greenhouse.

“Developing countries [20], not just in Africa, grew more biotech crops than developed countries [8],” Margaret Karembu said in a 2014 video available on [YouTube](#). Karembu is director of the ISAAA AfriCenter in Nairobi and holds a doctorate in environmental science education from Kenyatta University. She is the author of “Biotech Crops in Africa: The Final Frontier” (2009) and “The Adventures of Mandy and Fanny in Africa,” a cartoon booklet on biotechnology (2012).

Agricultural biotechnology encompasses a range of tools, including traditional breeding techniques, that alter living organisms, or parts of organisms, to make or modify products; improve plants or animals; or develop microorganisms for specific agricultural uses. Modern biotechnology includes tools of genetic engineering.

First commercialized in 1996, crops bioengineered through biotechnology with traits to enhance disease resistance, repel insects or increase harvests are being raised in other sub-Saharan African nations. Burkina Faso and Sudan — with 500,000 and 100,000 hectares, respectively — grow biotech-improved varieties of cotton, an important fiber and cash crop in Africa.

Karembu highlighted the continued annual growth of biotech hectarage in South Africa, Burkina Faso and Sudan.

“We can see that African countries are picking up very fast. Farmers are opting to continuously grow biotech crops. The hectarage is increasing by the year. Africa is quickly picking out those technologies that are relevant to their situation,” Karembu said.

Field trials on biotech rice, maize, wheat sorghum, banana, cassava and sweet potato are underway in Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda, preparing those crops for commercialization, ISAAA says.

A variety of wheat that can both withstand drought and control insects will be cultivated in another field trial to begin in South Africa in 2017. ISAAA reports that other field trials are being planned.

The crops in trials “are very important for Africa from a food-security perspective,” Karembu said, noting that the countries hosting the trials “are distributed in all four of the sub-regions of Africa.”

As the fastest adopted crop technology in recent times, biotech crops are part of the solution to the challenges of food security and climate change, according to their supporters. Both consumers and farmers must prepare to face those challenges, ISAAA says. It notes, however, that biotech crops are not a “panacea.” Crop rotation, pesticide management and other good farming practices are also critical for biotech crops, just as they are for conventional crops.

Karembu continues her research, 

examining a young plant in an ISAAA greenhouse.

Biotech crops contribute to food, feed and fiber security by making crops more affordable and by raising farmers' incomes through greater productivity, ISAAA adds. These enhanced crops also help conserve biodiversity and control deforestation by making greater harvests possible on the same amount of arable land used to grow less-productive conventional crops. And they reduce agriculture's environmental impact by reducing the need for chemicals to protect against pests and disease.

Karembu noted that farmers in countries neighboring those with field trials are learning from the example of Burkina Faso. "They are asking: 'Why can't our governments allow us to grow a crop [cotton] that we have already seen with our eyes is already making good progress and is making significant changes in the lives of Burkinabe farmers?'"

Links to [highlights](#) of the report and a [video](#) released January 28 featuring Karembu are available on the ISAAA web site.

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## Planting Grains Expands Poultry Production

YALI Network members have been reaching out this month, describing their efforts to increase their farm production and scale up agricultural enterprises. Thobile Dlamini, a Network member in the Lubombo region of Swaziland, decided to make her poultry enterprise more self-sustaining by cultivating field crops to use as chicken feed.

**Dlamini:** I am no longer buying chicken feed from shops. I use what I harvest since I also farm corn and sunflower to feed the chickens. I have about five hectares planted in yellow corn and sunflower, which provide feed for about 600 chickens. I raise the poultry to sell for meat.

**Q:** How does that one action boost your overall agricultural business?

**Dlamini:** It Increases employment opportunities for the community as some are employed to raise chickens whilst others are employed in the crop production. This further promotes unity and collaboration in the community.

Workers till crops that  support a poultry-raising operation in Swaziland.

Ever since the project started, crime has been reduced in the area and people are learning to be self-sustainable. Many are now trying to do similar projects and others are opening new ventures which promotes community networking and responsibility.

The funds generated from the project are used to uplift lives of the members and employees of the project and further used to expand the base of the business.

**Q:** How has raising your own chicken feed provided a gain for the enterprise?

**Dlamini:** Since we started ploughing and planting the chicken feed ourselves, we have seen a drop in costs, and instead those funds are now used to expand the project. This project is also interesting because I am not buying manure for fertilizer. I took the chickens' waste, and it works as good as manure for ploughed chicken feed.

**Q:** How do you hope to further expand?

**Dlamini:** I have 5 more hectares of land in which I could expand, but I'm reliant on rainfall now. Attempting to cultivate the additional land could put me at a high risk in case of drought. My dream is to drill a borehole for a stable water supply. With that, I then might hope to increase production to at least 1,000 chickens per week, providing me greater capital to buy further equipment to distribute to some of the big stores we have in Swaziland.

I want to build the capacity to steadily supply these stores with chicken portions labeled as my own brand. Then I'd be at a breakthrough point to provide job opportunities for more of the people in my community.

I bring this philosophy to my business plan: Business originates from love, ideas, knowledge and sharing the needs of the people and the community. Bonding with your business makes you come up with ideas on how to find the funds to keep it going and growing.

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## **A Productive Cooperative Depends on Organization**

*Aaron Moritz traveled from his home in Delavan, Wisconsin, to Guinea in 2012, serving with the U.S. Peace Corps. With prior training in agriculture and forestry, Aaron aimed to help the villagers he met increase their agricultural output and transition from subsistence to commercial farming. Aaron shared his story on how he and the villagers made that transition by establishing a gardening cooperative.*

When I arrived in Lafou, I found some cooperative enterprises in place, but just barely. There was a soap-making co-op that didn't know how to make soap. A beekeeping co-op that had never kept bees. And of the seven gardening cooperatives I met with, not one of them had maintained any sort of


cashbox, to keep account of expenses and income.

### **What is a co-op?**

*The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) defines a cooperative as having “voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member-economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training, and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for communities.” (Wanyama - PDF)*

In short, these cooperatives were poorly organized. In the following blog, I'll focus on how a disorganized cooperative may become better organized to move forward for the benefit of all contributing members.

Two principal criteria must be in place for a cooperative to become functional. First, members who are serious about making the cooperative work should set stringent rules and standard meeting times and identify ways to generate a revenue flow. Second, members must have a clear vision on what they'll gain by being active and contributing to the group effort. They should have consensus in how that goal will be reached.

Seen here spreading compost and  manure on the garden, members of Lafou's gardening cooperative established rules of shared labor to keep the group functioning.

### **Enforcing Rules and Generating Income**

I found that establishing rules and getting people to respect meeting times was a gradual but necessary process. In some ways, it is the most important aspect of managing a cooperative well, because rules and membership fees can weed out uncommitted members. Having a large membership is not an advantage if some members are half-hearted about their participation. A smaller dedicated membership is easier to manage, and it allots greater shares of the output to those who have made a true commitment.

The rules you enact should continue to evolve, and they should be enforced. For the first year of operation, most of our revenue came from monthly cooperative dues and late fees. This gave us investment capital to start various projects, including two cooperatively run gardens.

In addition to those gardens, the cooperative invested in nonperishables like bulk amounts of soap and dried hot peppers. We also made jam from squash and mangoes, which we marketed in the city. Once we had generated around \$300 USD, we started providing microloans to members who proposed feasible projects. This program helped the cooperative by generating loan interest fees,

and it also helped members by providing them low-interest loans for other business ideas they wanted to pursue.

This mutually supportive lending arrangement brought the cooperative to a turning point. Members started to see returns on their monthly investments and felt empowered by the success of the group. Many members saw a 100 percent return on their original loan amount, profits far exceeding the dues they'd paid to the cooperative up until that point.


In addition to generating revenue and getting people to honor meeting times, rules served to trump social hierarchies. For example, with 30 predominantly female members, two men routinely failed to come to meetings. One was an imam, the other the co-op president's uncle. Culturally, it was impolite to evict these two members, but because there were rules in place, the president was able to say, "We are not choosing to evict you; you have chosen to evict yourself."

### **Creating Interest and Incentives**

Generating the initial show of interest in potential members can be challenging. In the beginning, you don't have much working capital. Initially, I had to convince members that even though they wouldn't receive benefits immediately, they would eventually profit from co-op membership.

We were fortunate in that the World Food Programme (WFP) gave us the opportunity to participate in a trial program. They were looking for gardening cooperatives to provide fresh vegetables to local schools for children's lunches. In exchange, the WFP offered the cooperative beans, rice, salt, oil and other staple foods. The members saw the advantages of the agreement and were anxious to begin the partnership.

The distribution of these staples offered the new members their first insight into the potential of cooperative organization. The value of membership was further reinforced when former members who had failed to show up to meetings were denied portions.

Caption: Members of the cooperative   
build a fence around the garden.

All active members received equal shares regardless of their individual roles in the cooperative. A new democratic era had begun, and this renewed some members' faith in the president.

### **Conclusion**

If you form a cooperative of devoted members with a specific goal in mind, the cooperative will succeed. You can isolate the devoted members from the freeloaders through stringent rules and fees. In general, the more money and effort people contribute to a project, the more committed they'll feel, and these contributions will give them an overall greater sense of ownership toward the enterprise. As for generating income, this can be done in a multitude of ways. Be creative! YALI has a series of inspiring blogs on topics like [Agriculture](#) and [Business & Entrepreneurship](#).

Cooperatives are not necessarily the right choice for every individual or every community. Still, they are a good way to build the skills and know-how of individual members. This group organization also mitigates the risks associated with starting a new business.


Building this skill base in a cooperative can help an individual become confident in developing his or her own business strategy and starting his or her own new enterprise. And fellow co-op members might even lend the money to begin.

If there are any questions, please feel free to [comment on Facebook](#), and I will do my best to respond.

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## Namibian Family Farm Group Strives to Expand

Making the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture is a giant step forward that many African farmers want to make. Rachel Kalipi, a member of the YALI Network, describes how she's attempting to make this transition, as she, family members and neighbors pool their labor to work a 40-hectare (almost 100-acre) plot in northern Namibia.

Rachel is seen here in a  millet field on her family plot in Namibia.

Rachel described the crops currently cultivated.

**Kalipi:** We grow varieties of things during the cultivation season (six months in a year), i.e., millet, sorghum, melons, pumpkins, maize, groundnuts and beans. We also keep animals at the plot — chickens, cattle, goats, pigs and donkeys.

**Question:** Who does the work, and who shares in the harvest?

**Kalipi:** This started as a family subsistence farm and it has grown where we produce sufficient yields for [our] own consumption and a surplus we sell in the market.

The work is mainly done by the employees — three full-time employees at the plot — who stay at the plot throughout the year. During the cultivation season, additional labour is sourced from the community on a part-time and ad hoc basis. Up to 20 people work at the plot at peak periods. The harvest is split about 60 percent for consumption and 40 percent is sold in the market.

**Q:** What are your aspirations for the business, and how do you hope to achieve them?

**Kalipi:** The long-term objective is to turn the farm into a commercial business, to cultivate throughout the year and grow a huge variety of crops using innovative farming technologies. Virgin land is available where we could expand and increase our output.



The key challenges to achieving that are access to funds and the lack of necessary skills to do the transformation. I continue to seek funding from various sources, which will enable me to acquire the required equipment and seek the service of experts in agriculture to assist with transformation.

We use a basic tractor to plough the field, but we are still using traditional methods. The biggest portion of cultivation is still done manually. I am keen to learn more about tilling farming methodology as this is something that will benefit us greatly to improve our crop yield and shorten the period of soil preparation.

Namibia is a very dry country and cannot support full-year cultivation for a farm dependent on rainwater. The government has increased its investments in building dams to support agricultural projects and store water, so that has long-term potential.

In the near term, adequate rainfall is a continual problem. We frequently experience droughts whereby the country receives minimal rainfall. Timing becomes very important to ensure that the whole harvest is not lost.

**Q:** What can other members of the YALI Network learn from the way this agricultural enterprise has grown?

**Kalipi:** If there is anything I learnt from this venture, you don't have to wait for perfect conditions to start something. My family started this project as a small subsistence farm to supplement our daily needs. We faced a big challenge to clear this piece of land — given minimum resources we had at our disposal — and turn it into a productive farming unit.

Today, we are producing enough food for the family, a surplus to sell and food to distribute to the people who help us on the farm. Our ideal is to get an irrigation system and set up greenhouses to start growing crops throughout the year.

**Q:** What are some of the obstacles your group contends with?

**Kalipi:** There are several:

- Soil degradation. We have to continually put fertilizer on the soil to increase crop yield.
- Erratic rainfall.
- Some years, our fields are attacked by outbreak of insects and birds that destroy the crops.
- Lack of modern technology and skills to transform the current farming methodology to modern and efficient methods and systems.

Rachel Kalipi says her family has worked this plot in Namibia for 25 years, though the land has lain fallow for several seasons because of inadequate rainfall. The latest improvement on the land is to enclose it with fencing to protect the crops from animals. The next improvement Rachel and the family plan is to provide some form of irrigation to a section of the land so vegetables can be raised year-round.

In a related story, a family farm operation in the U.S. state of Wisconsin employed some nontraditional methods to scale their farm into a larger commercial operation, and they [shared their story](#) with the YALI Network.

